The Fourth Church Pulpit

JESUS HAD A MOTHER

December 12, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9 , Luke 1:26-38

". . . Blessed are you among women, . . ."
Luke 1:42 (NRSV)

Two years ago, early in Advent, I received an interesting and important note. It was from the sixth and seventh grade church school class, and it said:

"Dear Dr. Buchanan:

"We have some questions about Christmas.

1. Did the star stand still?
2. Were the shepherds and wise men real?
3. How was Jesus born if his parents didn't have sexual intercourse?

"Please meet us next Sunday and tell us the answers to our questions.

"Merry Christmas.

"The Sixth and Seventh Grade Church School Class"

Well, my first response was that back in the dark ages when I was in sixth grade the phrase "sexual intercourse" had not yet been uttered aloud in my hearing. In fact, one didn't encounter that particular phrase until ninth grade health class, if I remember correctly, and for certain, it was not a phrase one would use in a note to one's minister.

My second response is that no one ever tells you, nor do seminaries and divinity schools provide training in one of the unwritten lines in a clergy job description: namely, serving as a court of final appeal for questions no one else wants to answer. Parents can always say, "Why don't you ask your Sunday School teacher about that." The teachers apparently say, "Let's ask the minister." A young lad a few weeks ago shook my hand after worship and said, "Why, at the end of prayers, do we say 'Amen' and not 'A-women?'" I told him to ask Reverend Loving or Reverend Hutchison about that.

I met the class the following week, ate a doughnut and learned once again a fundamental lesson of theological discourse, and that is that "I don't know" is a legitimate and respectable answer to some questions. And I also discovered a wonderful thing about sixth-graders and that is they were quite capable of handling the fact that there are some things we do not, and probably will not, understand; and that there just may be more important questions about those things, such as "What do they mean? What are they saying to us?" The sixth-graders understood that when we talk about the virgin birth, we are not as concerned about Mary of Nazareth's sexual behavior as we are about the nature and identity of her son.

The incarnation, the enfleshment of God, the appearance of the eternal at a time and place in human history — the Christian claim — comes about when a young woman has a baby. That young woman is, arguably, the second most important person in the story. She is the only human being who knew the Son of God every day of his earthly life.

New Testament scholar, Raymond E. Brown, calls her ~~the first~~ disciple. She and Pontius Pilate are the only two human beings to make it into the Apostles' Creed, and in addition to Elvis Presley, she once again appears on a U. S. postal service stamp. The greeting card companies romanticize her most of all. She is beautiful, fair, her clothing spotless, her face radiant. She has, someone said, just come from the beauty parlor, has walked in and discovered this adorable little baby.

Her story, woven into the larger story of her son, and that woven into the even larger story of salvation, is a magnificent work of art. A young girl actually, perhaps in her mid-teens, has a vision, a dream, an intuition. . . It is an angel and the meeting between them is perhaps the most important, the most pregnant moment in all of human history.

(X) So . yes indeed - Hail Mary

Some of the most sublime art in all of history attempts to depict it. I have only personally seen reproductions yet, but one of the most exquisite is in the Cloister of San Marcos in Florence. It's a fresco, by Fra Angelica, done in delicate pastels, two gracious figures meeting in subdued light . . .

> "The angel starts to kneel, the astonished virgin to draw back. Their bodies are flexed in matching curves, their hands are folded in identical fashion across the breast, their heads are bowed at the same angle toward each other and their eyes meet . . . Mary, the reflection of the heavenly messenger, the mirror of the grace that meets her." [*Proclamation,* p. 36]

Frederick Buechner, an artist with words, tries his hand:

> "She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.
>
> "He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said.
>
> "As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now, on the answer of a girl."
> [*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who,* p. 39]

The problem, of course, is that she is promised, betrothed to a carpenter from Nazareth, a man named Joseph. And while they won't be living together for a year or so, the law regards them as already married. Her pregnancy, that is to say, is a very awkward problem. It is a public humiliation for Joseph and while it is a different culture from our own and we would not have it this way, the appropriate response for him is to divorce her. The fact that Joseph doesn't do what law allows and culture requires, is a minor miracle of grace. This good man takes a young woman, pregnant with a child not his own, as his wife. That's another story and a good one. Mary's begins with that shimmering moment of transcendence when she learns what is happening in her body and to her whole life. Nothing will ever be the same for her. It requires some response, this visitation from an angel: God apparently wants her cooperation, her participation, her commitment to the task. So she travels to see Elizabeth, as a frightened teenager might seek the counsel and strength of her strong and mature aunt, and it is Elizabeth who says to her, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Nine months later, actually while she and Joseph are away from their home in Nazareth, on the way to Bethlehem, her labor will begin and she will bear her son and she and Joseph will call him Jesus.

The late Howard Thurman, African American theologian, philosopher and mystic, wrote about Mary.

> "Madonna and child — (are) a recognition of the universality of the experience of motherhood as an expression of the creative and redemptive principal of life . . . In birth the mother becomes one with the moving energy of existence. It is the trysting place of woman and the eternal." [*The Mood of Christmas,* p. 15]

A woman I know who has had a few babies tells me that mostly it is men, who cannot do it, who talk that way about birth, and that anyone who can't do it probably shouldn't be equating the experience with "trysting with the eternal."

In any event, Mary gave birth to a baby. Jesus had a mother. And the different branches of the church of Jesus Christ have been alternately celebrating it and ignoring that fact ever since.

We Protestants don't quite know what to do with her. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers do. They have been venerating her for centuries.

> "Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Every Roman Catholic knows that prayer and many Protestants too. When things are really desperate in the last seconds of a football game and the quarterback drops back a few steps and throws the ball into the air in the remote hope that one of his teammates will catch it in the end zone and win the game, it is known as a "Hail Mary" pass.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the reformers swept away centuries of accumulated tradition about the saints. Mary was a casualty of that process and ever since Protestants have not been certain what to think about her.

The Roman tradition, on the other hand, after the Reformation, focused on Mary. In the middle of the 19th century the church declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, that Mary, like Jesus, had been conceived immaculately, without sin. Another major development came a century later when Pius XII proclaimed, in 1950, now with a fully developed doctrine of Papal Infallibility, the Bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven. Protestants ask about those doctrines, "Where did you read that in the Bible?" We play by different rules. For us, Scripture is the criteria. For Roman Catholics it is Scripture and tradition, Scripture and the church, its councils and Pope, when he speaks "ex cathedra."

And so down through four and a half centuries of separation it has seemed that on the topic of Mary Roman Catholicism has been most Catholic and, ignoring her — demeaning her by acting as if she wasn't even there — we have been most Protestant.

As to the question my sixth grade friends posed, her virginity, we Protestants have yet another complicating development. Protestant fundamentalists, since the beginning of this century, have used Mary's virginity as a litmus test of orthodoxy. The real and important question, of course, is Biblical authority. Is it in the words themselves, or the truth the words convey? We're still fussing with one another about that and we Presbyterians generally, not always, but generally — have come down on the "truth behind the words" side as the source of Biblical authority. That is, whether the virgin birth was a scientifically verifiable fact is not as important as the truth to which it points, or symbolizes. To fundamentalists, that seems soft, too easy, too compromising.

Yet by making the virgin birth more important than it actually is in the Bible, a test of faithfulness, the other side perhaps made an equal mistake. There's a wonderful little magazine that Presbyterian ministers receive called *Monday Morning.* It's our family party-line. Every Presbyterian minister receives it every week. You can write whatever you want and send it in to *Monday Morning* and it will be printed for all to read and next week to answer. We all look at it every week to see who's saying what to whom and check the obituaries on the last page. I smiled last week to read an essay by John E. Johnson, a ninety-four-year-old retired minister from

Birmingham, Alabama. Rev. Johnson was a Navy chaplain for thirty years, a pastor of a large church. Just for entertainment he wanted to stir up some discussion of the virgin birth this December. He reminded his readers of the old adage that the best response to the question which was often asked in oral ordination exams, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" is, "On the topic, I stand with St. Paul," who, of course, never mentioned it. Johnson suggested that we could also stand with Jesus and editorialized:

> "Jesus never mentioned the virgin birth either." If it was true, Jesus would have known about it, Mr. Johnson proposes and asks, "Wouldn't he have said to his disciples, 'Listen, you guys, I was conceived by the Holy Spirit and my mother was a virgin, and that established my relationship with God.' Let them shoot at this old gray head," Mr. Johnson concluded, "but Jesus never said anything like that." [*Monday Morning*, 12/6/93]

Ever more to the point, Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall observes that the misappropriation of the virgin birth by fundamentalists as a test of faith — and its dismissal by liberals as superstition — badly misses what Hall says is its purpose as a "focal point of faith's primitive wonder at divine grace." [*Thinking the Faith*, p. 329]

The truth to which the virgin birth points and testifies is the incarnation, the coming of the Christ. It means to say — "Pay attention! The most wonderful thing has happened!"

The theologian would have us pay more attention to what he calls the "other side" of the virgin birth . . . the ordinariness and commonness of it all: human birth.

> "Everything about the event is mundane — a too recently wed young woman, no one special, gives birth under hard circumstances. Nothing could be more common, then or now."

Jesus had a mother. When God decided to express love in an ultimate and absolute and final way, it was not in an act of cataclysmic natural drama. There was no earthquake, lightning or storm. The heavens were not ripped open. There was no mighty chariot or powerful army. What happened was something that happens every minute of every hour of every day somewhere in the world: a baby was born. The point in all this is not that Mary and Joseph did not have sexual intercourse but that the Almighty God, stooped low, to be among us, and came among us in the same way that you and I came to be here this morning. One time, a woman gave birth.

And so I think Mary's story is the connector between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and you and me, the human link between the story of Jesus and your story.

In conceiving and carrying and bearing the child, Mary is a sign that God is in this life with us, down to its smallest, most basic experience. She is the sign that this religion of ours is not about esoteric theological propositions or secret rituals. It is about life — birthing and growing and living and loving and dying. Mary keeps us honest, keeps us in touch, connected.

She is a sign that Almighty God cares deeply and passionately about the things about which we care deeply and passionately; that our pain is experienced by God; that God's countenance soars when we soar in joy and pleasure, and that God's heart breaks when our hearts break.

The son of God had a human mother. Is there a more eloquent or powerful symbol of God's love, God's presence, God's suffering than the pictures of mothers cradling wasted, paper-thin bodies of the children during famine? Is there a more eloquent symbol of God than the mother cradling in her arms the body of her crucified on: a mother cradling in her arms the body of her four-year-old, shot to death in a crossfire?

Mary is the reminder that God's own son lived human life to its fullest, and that there is nothing about you and me, your life and mine, that is inappropriate to bring into God's presence: hopes, dreams, fears, worries, failures, sins, mistakes, joys, pleasures, loves.

And Mary is a reminder that God's work in the world gets done when sometimes modest, young or old, nondescript ordinary people put their lives on the line, hear the voice of God, or a voice that might be God's and decide to say "yes," to commit life to following. It was a moment, was it not, when the angel visited a teenager and told her she was pregnant with God's son? Who could have blamed her for refusing the honor or for getting out of there as quickly as she could, or for going to her mother or her fiancee to tell about the dream, the nightmare she had?

Mary is a reminder that faith means following voices and dreams that are ours, taking risks, living into the future with courage and expectation.

In his bestseller, *Care of the Soul,* Thomas Moore wrote:

> "We can keep faith in a bubble of belief so that we don't see it having direct relevance in day to day living. I've worked with several people who are very devoted to religion and pride themselves on their faith. But they have no trust in themselves, and they don't entrust themselves to life. In fact, they use their belief system to keep life at a distance. Their belief in religion is absolute . . . but when they are asked to trust a person or a new development or their own lives, they run for cover. Belief can be fixed or unchanging, but faith is almost always a response to the presence of an angel."
>
> Mary is a reminder that this is how God came into the history of the world, and perhaps this is how God comes into your history and mine: "an angel," Thomas Moore says, "telling us that we are pregnant with a new form of life that we should accept and try and trust." [p. 255]

Jesus had a mother. She was the only one there at both his birth and death. She was the first Christian. She is a reminder of the depth and wonderful ordinariness of God's love. She is a reminder of the human face of God's love. She is a sign of God's presence in the world and a reminder that God calls you and me to acknowledge within ourselves a pregnancyGod's gifts of new being, new creation, new life, new behavior.

Hail Mary, indeed. Blessed are you among us all — and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Amen.